

“How to Change—Or Can I?” A Biblical Framework for Change—part 3**

“The chair you are sitting in is well worn.”

I say those words regularly, it seems. The reason I say them is because someone has come to my study seeking help for a problem. Maybe it's a marriage struggle, or a personal battle with fear or depression, or a conflict with a peer. As they share their story I see the frustration in their eyes, and I hear the despair in their voices as they recount the no-one-has-ever-faced-what-I-am-facing account.

“Is there help and hope for me?” they want to know. And it's at that point that I usually respond, “Yes, there's help available. The chair you are sitting in is well worn.” In other words, your situation is not unique. Others have faced similar problems and others—like you will soon—have discovered that God's Word offers real hope for the real problems real people face in life. And then we roll up our sleeves and dig into the Scriptures to find those answers.

Beloved, we have more in common than we care to admit often. For starters, all of us have problems, no exceptions, and consequently, all of us struggle at times, too. But the best news is that all of us can experience God's help and hope in our struggles through Jesus Christ. All of us can change.

But how do we change? is the question we've been asking in this series. Our goal in this topical study is to find out what the Scriptures say concerning six issues related to personal change. We looked at the first two issues in week one, and one more week two. Because of the critical and foundational nature of that material we'll take time to review at the outset today, before then breaking new ground.

Review: We began by pondering...

I. The Need to Change

Why is change necessary? The Bible presents four foundational realities that establish the need for change.

A. God is Creator and wrote the Owner's Manual.

To summarize, here is what the Creator expects of us, an expectation that will be for our good and His glory.

⌘By God's design, we are to love God first.

⌘By God's design, we are to love others as ourselves.

According to the owner's manual, this is the essence of human life. We are here to love God first and others next. Consequently, to the extent this is not true in our lives, *we need to change*. And that describes our

predicament...

B. We are sinners and have missed the mark.

Perfect people don't need to change. But everyone else does.

C. Jesus Christ is the one who makes change possible.

When Jesus went to the cross He accomplished two things that make change both possible and essential...

⌘At the cross, He took our sin.

⌘At the cross, He gave us His righteousness.

D. Jesus Christ is the model for change.

This is God's intent for us, *to be like His Son*—to respond like Him, to think like Him, to talk like Him.

Let me reiterate. To the degree that I am not like Christ I need to change. What's more, if I know Christ I *can* change. Why then do we often NOT change? It could be because of some unbiblical thinking...

II. Some Faulty Views about How We Change

If I believe false notions about change, I *won't* change. Here are three examples...

The “Holy Zap” view

This approach agrees that God is the solution to change, but suggests that change occurs instantaneously, the moment God *zaps* you. If you still struggle with something it's because you didn't get the zap—or the zap wore off. The solution? Go forward again, pray harder, and then you'll change.

The “Let go and let God” view

If you really want to kick some habit, you need to turn it over to God and get out of the way. Let go and God will take over. Then you'll change.

Sounds good, but it falls short. Yes, change often begins “by letting go and letting God,” but it doesn't end there. The Bible also emphasizes human responsibility when it comes to change (in passages like Romans

6, Ephesians 4, and Colossians 3).

The “Pull up your bootstraps” view

You’ll read this kind of thinking in the pop psychology best sellers. “If you’re going to kick that habit, you must believe in yourself. Show some self-respect. You’ve got what it takes within yourself, now make it happen. YOU can do it.”

Do I have responsibility when it comes to change? Yes. But do I have the ability to change in a way that pleases God? No. God says I need to trust in and submit my life to His Son.

That was week #1. In week #2 we explored another key issue, the *process of change*.

III. The Process of Change: Ephesians 4:17-5:21

Let me reiterate a statement made last time. *Change is a walk, not a one time event*. If you want to change you must take seven steps identified in Ephesians 4-5.

Step #1: You must know Christ (20).

Not simply *about* Christ, but you must truly *know* Christ. To use synonymous biblical terminology, you must be *in Christ* (Eph 1:1). You must be born again (John 3:3). You must be *saved* (Eph 2:8-9). You must *receive Christ* (John 1:12). Again, the power for change comes from Him alone.

Step #2: You must be growing in your knowledge of the truth (21).

“Getting saved” is just the beginning. People who change are people who are *growing* in Christ. And people who are growing are people who are taking steps to learn about Christ. And how do you learn about Christ? By placing yourself in situations where you can be taught His Word, like the Ephesians did...

Ephesians 4:21 Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus.

Step #3: You must “put off” the thinking and lifestyle of the old man (22).

Ephesians 4:22 You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;

Remember the mud pit illustration. When a camper got out of the mud pit at Scioto Hills, what did he do? He stripped off those filthy clothes. They were inappropriate to wear anywhere outside of the mud pit! Change begins by taking concrete steps to get rid of our old ways of thinking and living. I say *begins* because it doesn't stop there...

Step #4: You must “put on” the thinking and lifestyle of the new man (24).

Ephesians 4:24 ...and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

When God saved you He gave you a new identity. He placed you *in Christ* with all the resources of Christ Himself at your disposal. You can live a new life! But you must take specific steps to live that new life.

But changing your behavior isn't enough. The key to putting off old behavior and putting on new behavior is to change the thinking that affects both...

Step #5: You must be renewing your mind (23, also 17-19).

Ephesians 4:23 ...to be made new in the attitude of your minds;

When I was in High School a friend from church had a sow that died leaving behind several baby pigs. I became the proud papa of those squeally little creatures. I took them home and began to raise them, giving them milk from a bottle and later solid food.

Now suppose—and this did NOT happen but just suppose it did!—I decided to help those pigs change so they could live in the house with our family, not as pets but as siblings with full rights as family members. And suppose I brought them into our house and scrubbed them in the bathroom shower, sprinkled them with smell-good powder, and even put clean clothes on them.

“There, Mr. Pig, now you are a new creature,” I said. “Your old ways are gone. Welcome to your new life as a member of the household!” At which point he grinned at me, as cute little pigs can do, and I smiled to myself with great contentment, for indeed I had changed a pig.

But had I? No. And the fact would be verified the moment I opened the door and let the pigs outside and they ran for the mud. You see, I could take the pigs out of the mud but I couldn't take away their desire to be in the mud. To put it another way, I could change the pigs *behavior* (at least for awhile) but I couldn't change the *thinking* that produced that behavior.

Why are habits so hard for us to break, like eating too much or watching too much television? It's because my problem isn't simply my mouth or my eyes. My root problem is my mind. I need to take steps to *renew my mind*.

How do I do that? It's not complicated. I must be in God's Word continually. I must read it daily. I

must listen to its teaching weekly. I must memorize and meditate on it continually. Furthermore, I must fill my mind with influences that promote God-honoring thoughts, like Christ-exalting music and biblically-accurate books. And conversely, I must eliminate things that clutter my mind and hinder me from thinking God-honoring thoughts—that knocks out 80% or more of what’s on television.

You say, “This is radical stuff!” Yes, if you want to be God’s kind of person you are looking at radical transformation on a daily basis. And it starts with getting aggressive about your thought life.

Step #6: You must take specific steps to replace the old with the new (4:25-5:7).

The key word is *replace*. We must replace attitudes and actions that characterized our pre-Christ days with new Christ-like attitudes and actions. And the change involves dealing with *specifics*.

	Put Off	Put On
25	Falsehood	Speak the truth
26-27	Lingering anger	Resolve problems today
28	Being a taker	Work, save, and give
29	Words that tear down	Words that build up
30-32	Things that grieve the Spirit	Christlike kindness, compassion, & forgiveness
5:1-6	Every hint of sexual sin	Thanksgiving

Beloved, you don’t coast into change. As Jesus put it, “If the problem is your eye, cut it out.” In other words, you must practice radical amputation.

Step #7: You must realize the battle doesn’t end until we see the Lord (5:8-21).

Let me say it again. Biblical change is a *process*, a lifelong process. Christ provides the power, but we must utilize that power in day by day decisions of obedience.

At this point you might think, “Okay. So you’re saying that if I’ve got Christ in my life and I’ve got my Bible in hand, I can change.” To which I would say, “You have the potential to change, yes, but there’s something else God says you need for change that lasts.

“What’s that?” you ask. A story might help...

When I was a teenager I worked for my uncle who had a nursery business. One of my jobs was to help with planting trees for resale. The process started by cultivating the soil and then placing the tiny plants in the ground. The process ended when those plants matured and were dug up and moved to decorate someone’s home or business.

A seedling is supposed to grow, and, if you provide the seedling with light, water, good soil, nourishment, a proper climate, and proper pruning, it will grow. But what happens if any of those essentials are neglected? Either the plant’s growth will be stunted or worse, it might even die.

Think of it this way. A tiny seedling has the potential to change, to grow and become fruitful. But if growth is

to be a reality there must be a *proper environment*—in this case a beautiful thirty acre piece of bottom land.

What does it take for people to change and experience fruitfulness? It's the same thing. A proper environment is indispensable. And what is that environment? The God-ordained environment for lasting change is *the local church*.

Breaking new ground...

IV. The Environment for Lasting Change: The Local Church

The next statement may shock you, but I believe God's Word supports it...

In order to change in ways that please God we need the church.

Granted, this isn't the only reason church should be important in my life—in fact, it's not the most important reason (I should make church a priority because God, my Creator and Redeemer, desires and deserves for me to worship Him each week in the local church). But it is *a reason* why I should make church a priority. The church is crucial for lasting change.

A tiny seedling could sooner say, "I don't need to be in this field. I can grow over there in that concrete parking lot," than for a person to say, "I don't need the church. I can change and grow all by myself in my own house." Not so according to God's Word. God says I need the church. Why? Because by His design the church provides many essentials that facilitate change. Like what? I'll mention three.

A. The local church provides biblical encouragement.

Years ago some church members in Thessalonica were facing some problems. They needed to change. To help them Paul gave this instruction...

1 Thessalonians 5:11 Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

Here are two activities that are essential if a church is going to be a place where people are changing. First, we are to "encourage" one another. This Greek word *parakaleo* means in its basic sense, "to call to one's side." In a broader sense it means "to call upon for help." A person who encourages is one who comes along side someone in need and provides help to meet that need, through words and actions.

Next, we are to "build each other up." It's a construction word (*oikodomeo*), meaning "to build,

strengthen, edify.” Just like a carpenter takes action to build a house, we are to use what God has given us to build up each other.

Just what is encouragement? It’s more than a flippant pat on the back and the words, “Cheer up! Life’s tough but it will get better!” Biblical encouragement involves a relationship with meaningful interaction. You don’t typically experience encouragement with total strangers at the supermarket—unless one of you does something to bridge the gap (like offering the other person to go first in the checkout line). There must be a connection.

This is why the church is the perfect place to find encouragement. We have the potential for meaningful relationships! Each of us has been rescued by the same Savior, adopted by the same Father, and sealed by the same Spirit. Each of us has been placed into the same Body, grafted into the same vine, and led safely into the same sheepfold.

But encouragement doesn’t just happen. It requires *intentionality*, that is, intentional action on each of our parts to do some things with each other.

“Like what?” you ask. Paul tells us three verses later...

1 Thessalonians 5:14 And we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

According to this verse there are four different categories of people in the church. And Paul mentions that the church has four different responsibilities corresponding to these four kinds of people...

Category #1: The idle—it’s a military word denoting not keeping rank or being insubordinate. The word means “out of order” and is describing the person who is spiritually out of order or out of place, whose life isn’t in sync with God’s Word. Specifically, Paul may here have in mind the idle or lazy person who sponged off the church, refusing to work because he said piously, “Well, the Lord might return today and I want to be ready.”

What does an idle person need from the church? Does he need people simply to understand him, to support him? No. The text says he needs his brothers at church to “warn” him, to *noutheteo* him. A person who is out of line needs for fellow church members to admonish him and instruct him so he can once again live the kind of obedient life that pleases Christ. That’s the part the church is to play in his process of change.

Category #2: The timid—this word (*oligopsychos*) literally means “small soul.” It refers to someone who is “losing his heart,” the faint-hearted individual, the person who is discouraged. Life is hard and sometimes the trials of life overwhelm people, specifically the faint-hearted, the *timid*.

What does a small-souled person need? To be challenged? To be told to “buck up”? No, not at first anyway. He needs folks to “encourage” him. Paul uses a different word here, not *parakaleo* as in verse 11 but *paramytheomai*, meaning “to comfort, to console, even to cheer up.”

Think of it this way. Whereas the idle person needs a coach, the timid person needs a cheerleader.

Category #3: The weak—this word (*asthenes*) describes the helpless person, the individual who lacks, who is in a weakened condition. It can speak of the person who is physically weak and consequently prone to sickness. It can also identify someone who is morally weak. Literally the word means “to be without strength.”

I think of the brand new Christian who, while trying to learn how to live for Christ, experiences setbacks—first a job loss, then a health problem, then rejection by former friends. He feels overwhelmed and calls me and says, “Pastor, I don’t think I’m cut out for the Christian life. I’m not strong enough.” That’s who Paul’s describing here, *the weak*.

And what does a weak person need from church members? A pep talk? “Oh, stop whining! You know it’s not so bad. You’ll be alright.” No. Paul says we are to “help” the weak. The verb is picturesque. It comes from the root word that means “to have” and “to hold.” It means “to cling to, to hold firmly.” It’s the idea of “assisting” one in need. One definition states, “to be devoted to, to take an interest in.”

If the idle person needs a coach and the timid person needs a cheerleader, the weak person needs an athletic trainer, someone who can tape up his spiritual ankles so he can keep playing the game.

And Paul adds one more category...

Category #4: Everyone—This includes the idle, the timid, and the weak in the church, as well as everybody else (which implies that not everyone is idle, timid, or weak in the church). This takes in the good percentage of the congregation that’s just facing the “normal” challenges of living a godly life in an ungodly world.

How should we treat *everyone*? Paul gives this command (and all four of these verbs are all commands): “*Be patient* with everyone.” The term means “to persevere, to forbear, to be longsuffering.” It’s the idea of having a *long fuse* with people.

When I was a kid I played with firecrackers a time or two (okay, maybe more!). I didn’t like the short-fused ones. I learned early on they are dangerous. They can hurt you. So can short-fused people.

Paul says that in the church we ought to have long fuses with one another. It ought to take a lot for us to get upset with each other—and when that does happen we must follow biblical steps for dealing with the offense, including speaking the truth in love. Be patient with everyone.

Now, take a close look at that list. What do you see? I see categories that tell me that not everyone in the church is the same. Our needs are different. Our spiritual aptitude is different at this point in the journey. Consequently, the way we treat each other should differ.

Specifically, according to this text you don’t help a person who lost her spouse the same way you help a person who keeps writing bad checks. The former needs encouragement, the latter admonishment. We’re to cheer up a timid person but not an idle one—he needs a warning.

What about people who are honestly struggling with bad habits? Do they need condescending looks? No. They need brothers and sisters to come alongside them, to spend time with them, to engage in the ministry of biblical encouragement with them, who say, “We’re in this together. Let’s kick that habit by the power of Christ!”

And people struggling with bad habits need to humble themselves and accept this loving help.

“Thank you for caring enough for me to make it difficult for me to keep sinning.”

Right there is one of the reasons we often fail to change in lasting ways. We try to fight the battle all on our own and ignore the great blessing of the church. God never intended that. He knows we need the church, for many reasons, and here’s one, because the church provides biblical *encouragement* for change.

B. The local church provides accountability for change.

Long ago Cain asked God the question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Self-focused Cain shirked his responsibility to his brother, to his own destruction. The truth is, yes, we are our brother’s keeper, especially in the church. There is supposed to be accountability for change in the church.

“What does that mean?” you ask. We find the answer in Galatians 6...

Galatians 6:1 Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted.

Note this instruction is for “brothers.” The church is a family and when somebody in the family is in trouble, the rest move into action. That’s what good families do. And here’s a case where somebody is in trouble...

“If someone is caught in sin” — Suppose you looked out the window and saw your younger brother out in the yard holding his leg in pain, and then noticed why. He had stepped in a steel trap and couldn’t free himself. Would you head back to your easy chair in the den thinking, “That brother of mine. He shouldn’t have been walking in the yard in the first place. Maybe some day he’ll learn.”? No. You’d run out of the house and do whatever you could to set him free—and then later you’d start talking about ways to keep him out of traps in the future! That’s what family members do. And that’s what God intends His family to do. We’re in the recovery business.

Who is supposed to be on the rescue squad? The pastor and deacons? Yes. Anybody else? Yes. Paul says “you who are spiritual.” Who does that include? The preceding verses tell us. It’s the people who have the Holy Spirit and are allowing the Holy Spirit to produce His fruit in their lives.

Does that describe you? Do you have the Holy Spirit and are you cooperating with His efforts to produce Christlike fruit in you? If so, then you are supposed to be on the rescue squad.

Beloved, one of the reasons why change doesn’t last is because when folks get stuck in sin, they’re all alone. On the one hand, because they hide from the church, few if any brothers even see them caught in the sin trap. On the other hand, those who do see them are prone to say, “It’s not my responsibility. Even if I wanted to help, I don’t have what it takes.”

But we do have what it takes. And if we would all practice Galatians 6:1, lasting change would become a greater reality.

Frankly, accountability is not a popular word, especially in church circles. We like hearing that church is supposed to provide us with encouragement, but accountability, well that’s a different story. But we need accountability. It’s a good thing!

When a couple stops sitting together in church and it’s obvious there is tension between them, how

should the church respond? “Well, it’s none of my business if they’re struggling. Which of us has a perfect marriage anyway?”

When a man misses church two out of four Sundays consistently because he’s working voluntary overtime that’s causing his spiritual sensitivity to become calloused, what should the rest of the church members do? Just wait until his heart grows even colder and a more “serious” problem develops?

Beloved, God has given His church authority in the lives of His people. It’s not for their harm but for their good. The authority is His Word. He expects us to hold each other accountable to obey His Word. That’s why Paul sent Titus to straighten out problems in the church at Crete and gave him this charge...

Titus 2:15 These, then, are the things you should teach. Encourage and rebuke with all authority. Do not let anyone despise you.

God’s kind of church not only teaches God’s Word, but insists its people live according to God’s Word. God knows I need that kind of accountability. So do you.

A man left church one time and said to me, “You really stepped on my toes today, Pastor.” “Oh really?” I responded. “Yea, but thanks, it was good,” he said.

If we’re honest with ourselves we know that if we’re going to move beyond *talking* about change and actually change, we need more than instruction. We need accountability. And that is exactly another of the reasons why God gave us the church.

The church provides a third essential. First, encouragement, then accountability...

C. The local church provides the environment necessary for continued growth.

Relapse. That’s what often happens to people trying to change. They do okay for a while, then they slide back into old patterns. They *relapse*.

Once again, here’s why the church is vital. The church is not only the place to go to get back on track. It’s the God-ordained place that *keeps us on track*. Why? Because it provides the environment we need for *continued* growth. Notice what God says is to take place in the church...

Hebrews 10:24-25 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Here’s what God expects us to be doing, beloved. Spur one another on. Meet together. Encourage one another.

The Greek word for “spur one another” is illustrative. It’s *paroxysmos*. It makes me think of a bottle in our bathroom cabinet labeled “peroxide.” Do you like peroxide? As a child I didn’t. My mom poured it on a cut and it fizzed up and burned. “It’s for your good,” she told me. How could something that hurts be for my good, I wondered. Now as a parent I understand. A little pain now inflicted by someone who loves me prevents a whole lot of pain later by a terrible infection that could have been prevented.

That's what's supposed to be happening in the church. We ought to be involved in each other's lives in ways that promote spiritual health. Scratches will happen, but festering sores need not develop, not if we apply some *paroxysmos*. And that's what the church provides, not only encouragement and accountability, but also the environment for *lasting change*.

A Look back...

When God first created this world it was a tropical paradise. Picture it for a moment. There was lush fruit, temperatures were ideal, relationships were wonderful. The whole world was not only beautiful, but perfect. God Himself said, "It was very good."

Then Adam and Eve sinned and everything changed. Indeed, the need for change began, and God took the initiative. He revealed His plan to rescue His universe and establish a new creation. He would accomplish this plan by sending His Son into the cursed world, to become a man, to die in the place of sinners, to conquer death, and to form a new humanity that will one day enjoy the new heavens and new earth.

What is this new humanity called? It's *the church*.

Now picture something else, *a greenhouse* located in the middle of a barren desert. Outside the greenhouse everything dies. But inside it, things grow. There's life!

By God's design, that's what the church is, *a greenhouse*. The world is like a barren desert and in the world everything eventually dies. But in the church it's different. There's the potential for God-honoring change and growth in the church. It's where broken and dying things—like broken people, broken marriages, broken hopes—can be mended and live again, by the power of Jesus Christ.

Yes, the church is the perfect environment for change. Make it personal. You can change and grow beloved, no matter what you are facing, but you need to be in the greenhouse. You need Christ and you need His Body, the church.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church . It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.